New and Old Patterns of Settlements in Galicia. Do Villages Have a Future?

Xosé M. Santos Solla*

Abstract
During the past decades socio-spatial transformations have grown at a frantic pace. In the case of Galicia the opposition between coastal and inland territories is self-evident, and yet no specific policies have been shaped to timely tackle the problems and meet the needs of each area. Thus we encounter an inconsistent territorial organization pattern which is only looked upon from unitary and contradicting standpoints. The distribution of coastal territories responds to a polycentric model clearly opposed to the classical hierarchical structure which still prevails further inland. This paper will particularly focus on the latter, with the aim of reflecting on the role played by villages – i.e. those settlements in between the bigger cities and the smaller hamlets. The functions traditionally performed by villages have been significantly altered, in such a way that they now have to rival bigger cities and often have to adopt some very questionable strategies to face the future.

Purpose

During the past few decades, Galicia – the same as other European regions – has undergone some very important socio-spatial transformations. We have moved from a hierarchical model – consisting of seven main cities, an undetermined amount of villages or small towns and countless hamlets – to a multicentred linear model revolving around the so-called *Eixo Atlántico* (the 'Atlantic Axis'). The *Eixo Atlántico* forms an urban continuum consisting not only of compact cities and small towns, but also of dense semi-rural places. Outside this

* University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain)
xosemanuel.santos@usc.es

continuum, there are some cities which play an important administrative role, many villages, and a large rural world in strong decline.

Looking at this model, I would like to start by discussing the role played by villages, that intermediate link mentioned above. I will start by hypothesizing that the fact that we have moved from a hierarchical model, such as that of Christaller's central place paradigm, to a multicentred horizontal one leaves those *small towns*[1] which have not adapted to the change with barely no future expectations – at least if they stick to the growth strategies they have adopted so far.

Meijers (2007) summarizes very well the process which, from the beginning of the 1990s, led the change from the central place model to the network model, and which resulted from the important socio-spatial transformations which took place during the past few years. Meijers emphasizes the shift from a hierarchical relation – as described by Christaller and later on by Losch – to one where horizontality replaces verticality, following a trend towards specialization which stresses inter-city relations more than dependency. Within this new model, performance would not so much depend on the size of the settlement, but on the role it plays within the network. It is important to clarify that the concept of polycentrism is taken from the ESPON report, which refers to 'the relations between urban areas, i.e. the networks of flows and cooperation' (p. 17).

According to this report, polycentrism arises when the urban system works, more than hierarchically, horizontally amongst the different cities, thus encouraging the development of centres outside the core of the system itself. In short, what it favours is specialization, flows and cooperation among the different urban areas. Considerable importance is usually attached to functional specialization, one of the pillars upon which polycentrism is construed.

There are several authors (Rodríguez, 1997, 1999, 2009b; Lois, 2004; Aldrey and Vicente, 2009; Precedo, 1987) who, despite their different approaches, have written about polycentrism in Galicia. They specifically refer to the *Eixo Atlántico*, a sort of urban continuum which spreads southwards throughout slightly

more than 200 kilometres and into Portugal, with the AP-9 (the Atlantic motorway) as its backbone. There are five main urban areas along this corridor, although it is ever more difficult to make a distinction from one another. It is true that specialization and cooperation are still at quite an initial stage, trying to get over the previous model and overcome the long and widespread distrust created by an excessive politically-driven feeling of localism.[2] However, we can currently notice some significant changes, mainly due to a ceaseless time-space compression. The recurring statement – also among policymakers – that we need to work jointly to develop a common port, airport, university and health strategy (to mention just a few) is a clear example that there is a will to change. 2010 saw the beginning of a merger process between the two Galician savings banks – one at the north and the other at the south poles of the axis –, which demonstrates that the financial world is also ready for that interest convergence leading to a clear polycentrism.

Although we can pinpoint some central cities along this corridor – matching the old central places – there are also now broad, densely populated peri-urban areas which spurt around them based on the concept of functional specialization. They are designed to serve as industrial, residential, shopping or tourist areas, and in fact some of these municipalities show an enormous vitality which, from a demographical standpoint, places them high above some others where one single village drives growth alone. Lastly, we should also mention the presence of a well-developed market-driven agricultural practice.

These trends are expected to become more obvious in the near future. It seems that the new high-speed rail line connecting both ends of this corridor in roughly an hour will further encourage these future trends. The rail line will involve a new understanding of space-time relations, which will strengthen today's logic and reinforce the need for further cooperation and specialization.

However, both spatial models should be expected to coexist in Galicia. On the one hand, along the Atlantic coastline, throughout the *Eixo Atlántico,* the polycentric paradigm and the trend towards a more horizontal relation are turning more and

more obvious everyday. On the other hand, the older hierarchical model – which to a greater or lesser extent goes back to Christaller's approach – is still building up its strength in the inland territories. Paradoxically this model, usually linked to industrial economies (Meijers, 247), proves to be highly successful in less industrialized areas. The way it works is very simple: there are two central cities with their own relatively well-defined service areas and whose scope is roughly provincial[3]; then there is a group of small towns or villages which cater for the shopping and service needs of the close-by population; and finally, there is a wide set of smaller hamlets gradually being deserted.

In this paper, I would also like to focus on the way villages find their place within each of these organizational models. On the one hand, there are all the villages along the *Eixo Atlántico*, which are part of a very dynamic socio-economic and territorial system. Most of them have clearly moved towards specialization, and hence have become either industrial (O Porriño), fishing (Ribeira), residential (Cangas) or tourist (Sanxenxo) areas, to name but a few. The future of these vaguely defined places is closely linked to that of the axis as a whole.

On the other hand, there is a group of mainly inland villages which clearly follows the central place model. It is this group I would like to focus on now. I believe that its development model is already worn out, since it subsisted on the 'phagocytization' of the surrounding rural areas. Once these are consumed, decline seems inevitable. Moreover, the strategies used today to prolong their status do not seem to have a very promising future either, with the rare exception of those central places which have managed to create a productive area around them. The remaining ones will probably be swallowed up by the attraction from their particular provincial capital city, from the *Eixo Atlántico* or from other locations outside Galicia. This is something that Rodríguez (1997) already envisioned years ago, when he pointed out that the fact that these central places had not developed any urbane economic activities independent from their vicinity would inevitably turn into a mortgage they would not be easily able to redeem.

One of the main problems we encounter is the definition of a village itself. Rodríguez (1999: 11) points out that villages are central places, small towns, 'que centralizan o radio máis ou menos amplo dunha bisbarra rural á que serven mediante unha oferta de bens e servizos o suficientemente ampla como para cubrir a meirande parte das demandas procedentes dos individuos das súas respectivas áreas de influencia'[4]. Within this context, the size of its population is no valid value, since a village may range from a population of 2,000 to 15,000. It is obvious that this author is conveying a view about central places which, in the case of Galicia, shows a clear distinction between the coastal and the inner territories, the latter being a clear demonstration of this phenomenon.

Facts

Galicia's territorial organization shows some unique features which make it quite different from the rest of Spain. Quite the opposite, we can observe some significant similarities with the Northern Portuguese model. During the past few decades such special features have developed rapidly as a consequence of the speeding up of the homogenization processes which are taking place in Spain, and which have become much more patent from the second half of the 20th century.

The implementation of regional planning policies alien to the Galician reality resulted in numerous difficulties and troubles, so much so that even the landscape was substantially altered, as well as the identity of many places within this north-western corner of the Iberian Peninsula.

In a very succinct manner, we could say that territorial distribution in Galicia has traditionally swung around the parish. The ecclesiastical meaning attached to it would combine with a feeling of belonging to a common place wherefrom identity and solidarity bonds would arise. Not even the creation of municipalities back in 1833 did weaken such strong agro farming economic model. Parishes were the centre of public life, which brought together several hamlets and other singular settlements and formed a dense network which encompassed rather different

structures and morphologies[5]. Fairs and small local markets catered for the meagre needs deriving from such an important self-sufficiency model.

Right above the parish comes the village, a small urban agglomeration with frequently less than 1,000 inhabitants. Villages played a key role, since they provided all the goods and services which were not available in rural areas. The markets were just the right place to sell all the farming surplus. Doctors, lawyers, justice, or specialized trade – including clothing, pharmacy or ironmongery – fulfilled the population's daily needs. As a step prior to the development of bigger cities, Galicia saw the setting up of a vast network of such villages.

I have already mentioned that this particular network of settlements managed to keep its strength even after the creation of municipalities, an event which clearly threatened the meaning and role played by parishes. The strong migratory processes which so typically took place in Galicia during the first half of the 20th century did neither reduce the vitality of the rural world nor its distribution. Nevertheless, the following decades would bring about a significant shift, particularly from the 1960s and 1970s. There are several reasons which explain this process of change.

In the first place, I should mention the cultural change which started in the 1960s, when the urban world became the main focus of the territorial and social creed. The mass media, namely the television, started to broadcast a new reality filled with modernity and new opportunities. In addition to this, there are more and more people who start to experience urbanity, due to their emigration to some of the most important Spanish and European cities.[6]

Secondly, the trend towards the concentration of basic services was another reason which favoured the abandonment of rural areas. One of the first sectors affected was that of education, which saw the closing down of most *escolas unitarias* (those where one single teacher instructs a heterogeneous group of children who may differ in age) and, since the 1970s, focused its offer on bigger school groups located in the main villages and municipal capitals (Torres, Pazo and Santos, 1989). This had a great impact

on the further abandonment of rural areas. The fact that children experienced a more urban lifestyle from such early ages caused a sort of breach with the rural environment they lived in. And very frequently it was a quick process.

Considering that the road network was not very good at the time, and that most people were completely dependent on a not-very-efficient collective mode of transport – since cars were not yet common use – we can easily understand why many families decided to move part of their members to those central places offering such basic service.

But there are still at least two more reasons which must be taken into account, both of them linked to migration. On the one hand, many of those who were pulled into migration left their children under the care of some elderly relatives, which further increased mobility problems and contributed to their moving to close-by villages or towns. On the other hand, one of the deepest desires of most people at the time was to own a flat down town, since it involved leaving the hard life associated to the rural world far behind. Whereas the first wave of migration to the American continent marked a time when most savings would be used to buy a piece of land back at home – a land which, during the first decades of the 20th century was still in the hands of feudal descendants (Villares, 1982) –, during the second wave, rather targeted towards Europe, the possibility of acquiring a flat gained greater prominence.

In short, small towns and villages substantially benefited from such concentration of services, above all educational services. Many of those coming back from migration or families with school-age children opted to leave behind the harsh living conditions attached to rural areas[7], and thus replaced them with a new lifestyle which – despite not always being better – seemed to offer better opportunities and, even more, a way of life which was closer to what was perceived as a 'modern life'. We could somehow look at it from the perspective which inspired many German thinkers since the end of the 19th century, who believed that cities were the expression of modernity and capitalism, as opposed to the Marxist discourse which held that feudalism was the rule in rural areas (Claval, 2007).

Rural areas did not only witness the disappearance of public services, but also of private occupations such as trade and transport systems. A whole way of life was caused to collapse, including a relationship pattern where local festivities were a key mainstay. The restoration of democracy also had a significant impact. Municipalities – which in principle were units completely oblivious to the interests and realities of rural areas – gradually started playing a leading role and became the focus of local decision-making processes. Therefore parishes lost part of their meaning as territorial institutions, whereas municipal capitals saw their prominence and attraction capacity reinforced.

One further not less significant problem comes to add to all this – i.e. the economic monofunctionality targeted at an industry as fragile as the agro-farming sector. Its impact is clear: there is a loss of job opportunities which particularly hits women, the group that proportionally emigrates more, thus enhancing a 'masculinization' of the rural world. But it was also the increasing specialization and the search for profit maximization at farms that led to a gradual abandonment of agro-farm activities and to the substitution of croplands and meadows for forested areas where fast growing tree varieties would yield a higher profit at no economic cost. As Fernández and López (2000) pointed out, the abandonment of traditional forest use systems opened up the possibility of considerably increasing the land available for farming and grazing, as the studies on land productivity suggested. Yet what we saw was the steady advance of woodlands and the phased withdrawal of arable land, which still today represents a very tiny portion of the total – lower than 30 %, far below the European average.

The European Union played a major role in this abandonment process, since it not only gave the final push to the elimination of the small farms[8] which sustained the Galician rural landscape and lifestyle, but it also and above all created all sort of false expectations in terms of the alternatives to such lifestyle, which basically led to de-agriculturalization and to the supporting of forestry as well as any other activity involving functional diversification. Initiatives like LEADER were actually nothing but the scraps with which the EU tried to make up for the huge

cultural, social and economic losses sustained, which would more than ever move the concept of food democracy (Johnston, Biro, MacKendrick, 2009) away from our reality.

This is the overall context in which we could set rural Galicia, which led to the abandonment of hamlets and croplands, thus causing an unprecedented crisis. What I would like to discuss in this paper, among several other topics, is how this process impacted the small towns and villages. They were the ones which benefited most from it – at least at the beginning since, as I will explain later, things could turn out to be completely different in the medium and long term.

Throughout the 20th century the promulgation of certain modernity criteria based on urban growth became widely accepted. It was in urban areas where *things happened*. It was there where economy expanded and where one could socially progress. The common ideology was also built based on the forms which should govern such processes, using verticality as a model which mirrors phallocentric control. U.S. metropolises as New York, so repeatedly shown in the media, came to the forefront of all thoughts or opinions. As cautiously and carefully as one may put it, this type of metropolis was the example everyone wanted to follow. The causality relationship between economic progress and urbanization turned up to be well defined (Rodríguez, 1997).

Culture also started to play an increasingly prominent role within the new urban-based economy, even though it came on stage quite late – sometimes too late, when part of the historic and cultural heritage had already been wrecked. By the time the idea of heritage revitalization reached the historic town centres, many of them were in an extremely delicate, even hopeless situation. And yet the economy of culture hit the rural world disguised as folklorism, and above all casting an urban eye over it which prized the so called 'natural landscapes'[9] and the stone buildings representing the rural Galicia of the dominant elites. It is these 'unique' aspects which the monopoly rents hoarded (Tretter, 2009).

These perceptions soon reached all small towns and villages in Galicia, leading to a rapid expansion of housing development

and to the destruction of most of their heritage sites. Paradoxically there was no parallel increase of population, since many of those migrating to Europe simply yearned to become flat owners back at home, and thus turned real property into the primary destination of their speculative investments. This took all place within a context where there was barely no observance of urban planning regulations, which strengthened the decharacterization of old places and the expansion of an urban development only driven by property ownership.

TABLE 1: Population and housing evolution in four inland villages

	Pop. 1991	Pop. 2001	Housing 1991	Housing 2001
O Barco de Valdeorras	10,495	12,959 (18 %)	5,441	6,692 (23 %)
O Carballiño	11,134	12,521 (12.4 %)	6,500	8,067 (24.1 %)
Chantada	9,401	10,184 (-7.6 %)	4,705	5,064 (7.6 %)
Monforte de Lemos	20,318	19,091 (-6 %)	9,293	11,499 (23.7 %)

Source: Population and Housing Censuses, 1991, 2001. INE (Spain's National Statistics Institute).

Some interesting conclusions can be drawn from this table. First of all, I should highlight that the data above refer to municipalities, and not only to villages. I should also add that the latest officially available housing data go back to 2001. Still, it can easily be observed that all the examples show how urban development grows much quicker than the population. It is also obvious that there is a demographic decline which is unparallel to housing development. Another significant fact is that first home figures range from 57 % in O Carballiño to 68 % in O Barco de Valdeorras, their relative volume increasing only in these two municipalities – the ones where there was precisely an increase of population. This means that, in all likelihood, the increasing number of homes in those municipalities where

population is declining revolves around the segment of non-primary homes.

Looking back to the figures from 2001 onwards, we will notice that both O Barco en O Carballiño maintain a steady growth in population, whereas the other municipalities undergo a period of stagnation or a slight recovery at the most. As for housing, no official data are available, but we should not forget that the great property boom was precisely fuelled during this first decade of the 21st century – at least until the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008. Surely the 2011 census will show a higher growth rate for housing than for population.

It is important to highlight that most of the times the above mentioned population increase was not joined by the relevant economic strategies upon which a solid system should be based. In fact, it was mainly the service and building industries which supported what we could call 'false progress'. It is not easy to find an example of a village which managed to adequately lay the foundations of a model approaching the so called 'local development districts'. We could perhaps mention Sarria, home to the furniture industry; Lalín, home to the textile industry; and O Barco de Valdeorras, the primary source of slate production.

The flow of EU structural funds throughout the 1990s and the first decade of this century was a lost opportunity which could have been used to reverse things. The same applies to the political decisions adopted by the various public administrations. Most of the times neither the improvement in local communications nor the widespread availability of industrial land contributed to settling a diversified economy, since there were no entrepreneurs willing to invest in any other sector but in real estate, which was the true driver of capital gain.

Since the initiatives to develop industrial areas failed, many infrastructures and facilities were underutilized[10], which led many areas to redirect their efforts towards tourism – a strategy which was further facilitated by the EU funds' philosophy. Unfortunately the results were not very successful either, partly due to the profound lack of knowledge about how to operate within this industry (Cuíñas and Santos, 2003). The pillars supporting the efforts put in the tourism industry were the

assumed cultural and natural resources featuring our traditional landscapes. Clearly mixing up heritage and resources, innumerable means and efforts were devoted to heritage promotion and rehabilitation, to making external elements more attractive, and to creating seasonal jobs – the latter not always adequately trained and often alien to the local surroundings.

The results obtained were not at all what was expected. On the one hand, most villages failed to create an adequate tourist product or to find their place in the market. Moreover, their historical artistic heritage often totally lacked character, which made the task of accessing the tourism market even more difficult. On the other hand, they tried to fit the surrounding rural areas into their tourist amenity. Yet these areas had been phagocytized by the central place, which had far too often turned them into demographic deserts lacking any kind of initiative, showing a decaying cultural heritage and an array of natural landscapes ever more dominated by extensive wooded areas.

We were so faced with a difficult situation, for which there was no easy way out. Most central villages took the wrong path – instead of acting as a central place servicing a lively and active rural community around it, they chose to absorb this liveliness and turn it into a dependency. Now that they cannot keep up to such growth rates and are even starting to show symptoms of decline, new strategies aimed at redirecting a quite critical situation are being developed.

One such strategy, which to a certain extent has already been pointed out, involved turning themselves into the reference centres for rural tourism. Based on the disastrous policy followed in this field, as well as on the grave economic crisis faced by these areas, many villages engaged in a desperate struggle to try and get hold of the dynamics generated by such type of tourism. Since 1990 all public administrations – namely the Galician administration – did indeed start to make a constant effort to open new rural hotels spread throughout the territory. Consequently, today we are faced with a large number of rural hotels scattered throughout the region which frequently hinders productive specialization. The lack of a specific tourist product, together with other difficulties as the economic crisis, is turning

rural areas into no more than the support of an activity which hardly meets the expectations about such niche market.

The study carried out by Sparrer (2007) pointed out that a significant percentage of people who spent a night in a rural hotel did not actually practice what we understand by 'rural tourism'[11]. According to Sparrer clients resorted to this kind of accommodation for its quality and convenient location to take a trip to the beach or a nearby village. Such motivational factor encouraged many villages to try and get hold of part of that market share, since they proclaimed themselves central places of the surrounding region. To tackle the clear lack of competitive accommodation small hotels were added to the network, often making use of the existing built heritage.

Yet there was a second better formulated strategy, although since it required a specific political action it proved to be far riskier. As a result of the constant trend towards population concentration in capital cities, and particularly in villages, many municipalities experienced a sharp decrease in population. Consequently local administrations – whose overall budget deficit is broadly acknowledged – started to face serious problems to manage smaller districts, not to mention the onerous burden their maintenance placed on the Treasury. This led to the first proposals of 'municipal merger' which, under the umbrella of the need for rationality and saving, started to play a leading role within most villages. It was a proposal which gained more and more support – particularly after the severe crisis which loomed up from the second half of 2008 – and which is now part of the public debate.

Inframunicipalism (Rodríguez, 2007) points to many local governments' inability to take on their own responsibilities. As contradictory as it may seem, the role of provincial governments – the bodies which should presumably be supporting such small municipalities – seems to be far less questioned, despite the fierce attacks periodically launched on them regarding their giving shelter to the most traditional forms of political clientelism. It is true that supporting a municipal merger does not necessarily mean that this must be integral, but simply selective (Rodríguez, 2009) – i.e. it should involve the creation of

a new central management and organization unit, but without discontinuing the functions performed and the services offered by the municipal governments which have ceased to exist as such.

One of the claims put forward against integral mergers is that of identity, since it seems that such concept regains some sort of essentialism long ago overcome. We must not forget that the idea of 'municipal identity' was a recent one, and that it was parallel to the destruction of the 'parochial identity'. Be it as it may, we should also take it for granted that new identities will certainly sprung up from these mergers. In other words, we must believe that a selective merger is no more than a step towards a further integral merger.

In practice we are talking about a process which, as we have already explained, has a long historical background and was not at all exclusive to Galicia. The concentration of services has been patent, and the crisis we have been hit by since the end of this 21st century's first decade is further contributing to such concentration, as it can be seen through the constant closing of schools and health care centres all over the place. And still we should wonder what would happen if there were full freedom to choose a school. What would its impact on small towns and villages be? Would it lead to a massive migration towards towns and cities?

From the standpoint of reasonably managing the resources available, maximizing the administration's efficiency and saving public resources, their case is absolutely irrefutable. But then there are the implications that such restructuring has for spatial planning. Following the argumentation above would lead to sustain that a political and administrative reorganization as the one proposed – although there are some intermediate stages – would definitely speed up the concentration of services and population. This would further lead to a bipolarity which could only be solved as follows: on the one hand, there would be some highly urbanized or urban spaces guiding economic and social life; and on the other, some other scarcely humanized places clearly aimed at meeting the needs of the latter, either as

providers of all basic commodities (water, timber, minerals, clean air, etc.) or of a space for leisure.

Leaving aside the cultural losses involved, at least two questions should be raised. Is this necessarily a negative process? Is there any other choice? There is no absolute answer to any of them. They both require deep thinking, since today's trends are profoundly changing our territorial distribution.

It is quite hard to talk about this process of concentration alone, since today's communication technologies and modes of transport also favour an obvious dispersion. Moreover, despite Galicia's cultural unity, from an economic and spatial standpoint we encounter a dual territory which cannot be handled unitarily, since the required actions and answers differ from one place to another. This is, I believe, one of the fundamental mistakes made by the *Directrices de Ordenación do Territorio de Galiza* (DOT)[12], a document which, despite acknowledging the existing disparities, does no more than offering standardized solutions.

In the case of the *Eixo Atlántico* – that development strip running north-south into the region of Oporto, at the least – territorial organization shows a complex reality. The scattering of activities and population is more than clear throughout the area – over 200 km in length –, with central places barely gaining any inhabitants during the past few years. The main problem of this urban continuum lies in the lack of political willingness to create supramunicipal bodies which can coordinate such scattered growth. The current state of affairs is partly due to the fact that main cities are too keen to be centre stage. Their centralist-localist approach becomes an impassable barrier which stops them from admitting that they are no more than a piece in a puzzle where all pieces are equally important. In any case their final contribution should be their own leadership.

But if we move further inland, we will easily perceive quite different processes. If we look at any kind of statistics available – regarding hamlet abandonment rates, population aging, the disappearance of farms or the spreading of woodland – we can easily confirm the above mentioned trend towards duality. My hypothesis is that in these areas the move towards concentration

can only be negative, at least if it continues to be done under the same conditions it was until now.

As I have already mentioned, many villages based their growth mainly on absorbing the dynamics from all those small rural settlements around them. Once these settlements start to decay, villages need to widen their sphere of influence in order to keep up the upward trends. Their aim – their main aim, at least – is not those rural settlements any more, due to the unfavourable circumstances they face. It is now the turn of small municipal capitals to succumb to the villages' pressure. In fact, the unnecessary costs attached to local administrations, as well as those regarding the upkeep of schools with barely no children, or the deficit run by primary health care centres, have already been the object of a lot of criticism. The current economic crisis has turned into the perfect excuse to support this case.

In short, the current state of affairs seems to indicate that we are already moving, through the discontinuing of some basic services, towards a model of concentration whose last step will be an administrative reform – which is, paradoxically, what is arousing more controversy. And this is so because many small municipalities are taking this letting go of the responsibility involved by taking care of all the expenses attached to those vanishing services as an economic relief, without realizing (or perhaps they do) that this is just a further step towards concentration.

The problem underlying such village voracity is that they are not capable of devising a development pattern of their own, one that can create wealth itself without the need to take it away from other areas. It is basically just a way to flee away from the problem. If no big change is made to their economic strategies, no permanent growth will be achieved – it will only be an expiring growth which will die out as soon as its nourishing surroundings become gradually extinct.

The second question I would like to address is about whether we have any choice in terms of finding another better way. But the answer to this question is no more than speculations about the future. The first obvious choice seems to be the resuming of a more balanced, less hierarchical territorial model, where each

population settlement plays a clearly defined role. It is not simply a political-administrative reorganization what is needed, but rather an adequate and precise reallocation of duties. Among many other things, it would involve getting rid of all quantitative obsessions and focusing on the role each area must take on from a systemic standpoint.

Seen from this perspective, I understand that the starting point should be a bottom-up gradual dynamization of rural areas[13]. And yet this first stage seems to be particularly complex. Considering the present globalizing trend towards functional specialization, it seems difficult for Galicia to be able to thrust agriculture and farming activities back into the limelight and turn them into the driving force behind a new development. Perhaps Claval (2007: 158) was true when he said that 'settlement patterns have ceased to be controlled by their base – the rural population they served. They are organised from the top…'. Such statement makes sense within the framework of a polycentric model, but not so much within a hierarchical one, where the central place dynamics depends largely on its surroundings. Was it the villages that contributed to the articulation of rural areas (Rodríguez, 1997), or was it the other way round? Be it as it may, when one of the terms of the binomial fails and the other does not react to the new circumstances, a crisis situation is guaranteed.

On the whole, Galician rural areas face a critical situation, because despite the massive abandonment of croplands and meadows during the past few decades, none of the badly-needed structural changes were introduced. Forests – usually poorly managed and underutilized – are also not perceived as an option to change behavioural patterns, despite their huge potential for job creation. It is important not to forget that most of the wood produced in Galicia is only used at a first transformation stage, and that the loss of added value and the breach in the timber producing chain does not allow us to share much of the industry's wealth (Miramontes, 2009). Not to mention the many other economic uses we could find for forests.

As a result of the pressure put by public policies and of not introducing the necessary structural changes to support rural

areas, small landowners gradually left the country and either discontinued their farming activities or transformed the existing land uses by moving towards intensive forestry. In such circumstances only some farms managed to survive, and that after undergoing a resizing process which still failed to make them competitive within the European markets[14]. Some farmers in some specific areas also managed to survive, particularly those along or close to the *Eixo Atlántico*, which specialized in more demanded crops such as vegetables, wine, or even fruits. If we add the marginal location of this whole region, the picture gets even worse.

When we use the word marginal, we must do it in the broad sense of the word. Marginal refers, for example, to the Spanish agricultural policy – markedly Mediterranean and totally opposed to the Atlantic character of the northwestern part of the country. It also refers to the position of prominence this policy is given by the regional government, more concerned with the urban world and its development axis. Last but not least, it also applies to the corporate sector, totally unable to stand up to the big multinationals which unquestionably control transformation and distribution.

In terms of revitalizing these areas, the choices around the neo-rurals or the back-to-the-land movement – which among other things cherishes the value of family-based agriculture and the 'rural idyll' (Trauger, 2007) – do not seem very promising either. Although in both cases we could talk about a 'rural cosmopolitanism' (McFarlane, 2008), from a sociological perspective Galicia has very strong ties with rurality, what becomes apparent by the rejection of the term itself. It is true that there are certain features considered of value, such as the quality of farm produce; but on the whole rural land continues to be linked to poverty, seen as responsible for the migration of thousands and thousands of people, and tied to an identity quite distant from the sought modernity[15]. There are quite a few significant examples to illustrate this point. One could be the way part of the popular heritage was destroyed – mainly traditional homes, which were often replaced with chalet-type dwellings built in a style imported from other European

countries. Yet it is important to highlight that we are now perceiving a certain return to the rusticity of stone cottages, mostly driven by a rural tourism enhancing the value of tradition. But if we want to rebuild rural communities and reinvent those places based on a non-hegemonic approach (Inwood, 2009), there is still a long way to go – if that way actually exists.

Another perhaps more self-evident example is that of the language. Compared to Spanish, the Galician language has experienced a very quick recession throughout the past decades. From a historical standpoint, the educational system and the mass media were two of the key drivers behind such recession, but also the age-old pressure on it has led to a minorization process involving a substantial loss of prestige. Still today the association between diglossic Galician speakers[16] and rural population is a perfectly suitable binomial. In fact, both sociolinguists and geolinguists have repeatedly reported the change of language occurring not only in country-city migratory movements, but also in country-village ones (Valcárcel, 2001, 2007). We should not forget that the latter still have the complex of being urban areas hanging over them[17]. And we should also remember that in today's social and spatial distribution the role of leading identity is played by some cultural codes where it is the urban world that takes over hegemony (Claval, 2007). According to this French author, 'the significance of existence was not the same in a small town and a large city' (Claval, 2007: 158). Nor also in a small hamlet. And there is also something else we must consider when thinking about the future, which is that if until now the spreading of Spanish throughout Galicia followed a clearly urban hierarchy (Valcárcel, 2007), what will the process look like under a polycentric territorial paradigm? And what spaces will Galician speakers take up?

I think it is only fair to suggest that Galicia does not meet the necessary conditions to experience such back-to-the-land movement. It is true that the more developed and urbanized areas are undergoing some neo-ruralization processes, yet preserving strong urban ties linked to employment and lifestyles. It is also true that there are some very dynamic rural areas which, since they are virtually part of an urban continuum, we should

rather classify as 'pararural'. These are the areas where the strong opposition between urban and rural lifestyles became blurred (Claval, 2007). Outside this sphere, the back-to-the-land process – although it has not been quantified – is barely significant. Moreover, it is often linked to the establishment of rural hotels, whose impact on country life was totally opposed to what was expected: rather than contribute to the generation of local income, it encouraged the settlement of foreign dwellers with limited dynamization capacity. It could even be argued that it contributed to the reproduction of certain class roles (Santos, 2002). To sustain this idea, we could employ the same argument as Van Kempen and Murie (2009: 383), who suggest that in Europe mainly 'the welfare state confirms peoples' status rather than changes it'. In short, we are talking about localized gentrification phenomena (Smith, 2007) with no real capability to act as driving force whatsoever.

But if there is a distinguishing feature to describe the rural world before it fell on agricultural and farming specialization, that is multifunctionalism. Perhaps we should try to get back to this path. There are ever less possibilities for agriculture and farming to play a leading role, except for some cases of top-quality productions which, in any case, show a clear spatial concentration. Industrial land has proven highly inefficient, and not even the building of high-capacity highways will be able to change its use. These most eagerly awaited highways – seen as a mirror of modernity – are acting rather as corridors to link opposite poles than as real development axes, as is the case of the Atlantic coastline. And briefly, we should also mention the textile industry which, unable to compete with foreign labour costs, is gradually losing its prominent position.

I believe that if there is something we should really highlight this is the increasingly leading role rural areas are playing as providers of basic goods and resources. As paradoxical as it may seem, the decline of rural areas contributes significantly to the sustainability and growth of urban spaces. The so called clean energies, for example – in our case, wind energy – colonize our mountain tops without even considering the impact made by the opening of tracks for the lorries or the location of the turbines

themselves. Tree planting – particularly eucalyptus – warrants the existence of an environmentally responsible country which can absorb a great deal of the pollutants we release into the atmosphere. Actions taken on rivers are also a good example. It is true that, at least in principle, the building of huge water reservoirs has been discontinued. But still there are many small hydroelectric power stations which end up altering the whole river system, despite their actions being based on the sustainability and minimal impact of their interventions.

It is not simply a question of the use and abuse of natural resources. The decline of rural areas creates much hope around the establishment of all sorts of 'drainage facilities', including those purposely *social*. Penitentiaries and solid urban waste treatment plants are two good examples.

One of the most interesting things to look at is how this type of activities impacts both areas. In the case of wind turbines and their impact on urban areas – and the same applies to eucalyptus plantation and hydroelectric power stations – large companies reap substantial economic benefits from them. But also from an image standpoint, they secure considerable improvements, e.g. through their social commitment to using clean energies or the replacement of plastic packaging with other less aggressive paper one. There is another outstanding example we could point out in Galicia: the stone industry, which brings together the site ruining associated to quarries and the recovery of the traditional use of these materials (granite, slate) in buildings, pavements and other urban elements. Turning to penitentiaries, we can easily observe not only the capital gain derived from the reclassification of land uses – usually in the city centres – but also the allegedly improved quality of life for those imprisoned, as well as the invisibilization of a social problem. Lastly, solid waste treatment plants point to the population's environmental awareness and the responsible decision-making of public authorities.

Having mentioned all these benefits to the economy and urban society, we can wonder what advantages rural settlements draw from all this. If we take wind or hydraulic power first, job creation cannot actually be seen as an advantage, since once the station is in operation the automatization of most processes

minimizes all needs for trained staff. There are indeed special taxes levied on big dams and wind farms, but still the percentage that goes to the public or private direct beneficiaries is so small, and there are so many conditions regarding the way they can employ such revenue, that we often refer to it as a quite irrational and colonial situation. This applies to virtually all facilities and actions of this type, and is leading most rural municipal governments to a situation where they cannot even cope with paying their workers' salaries. And yet the existence of an institution as obsolete as the provincial government – known as *deputación provincial* – relies on its potential to support all these small rural municipalities. The question is what they are going to rely on to justify their existence when many of these small municipalities disappear. Broadly speaking, communal forests and a more efficient resource utilization of the forest provide an excellent opportunity to create wealth, even though their management should be substantially improved.

All in all, we should ask ourselves the following question: what would occur if rural areas were paid a fair price for the exploitation[18] of their natural resources? And to follow this line of thought: shouldn't urban areas fund the quality of the water they drink, of the air they breathe, or even the invisibility of their consumption and also *social* drains? It is obviously not only a question of money, although there are at least two features we should consider from a materialistic point of view: money grants respect and money adds value to what we consume.

The current scenario does not seem very favourable to villages. As I have already pointed out, unless we completely reverse our productive model, the future of villages will only lie in the dynamics of rural areas. Yet these are now transforming into sites to which cities can outsource their not-so-convenient activities, and where big corporations – mainly settled in the biggest cities – can exploit natural resources at their will. Not to mention the case of natural reserves, also conceived from an urban perspective.

Once again I insist that we need to bring about far-reaching changes. I mentioned before the impact that the flowing of cash in the form of compensation for the location of certain activities

could have in rural areas. Without trying to minimize its importance, I believe that a social transformation in terms of giving a real value to the category of rurality will actually have more far-reaching implications. In opposition to what happens in other parts of Europe, rurality in Galicia is still associated with backwardness and with the traditional aesthetics ever more linked to picturesqueness. Quite the opposite to the cosmopolitanism typical of contemporary cities. Villages, in so far as they depend on their rural surroundings, are seen as closer to the picture of a city.

The problem we must solve is how to introduce such changes within the present context, i.e. a picture defined by population ageing – not to mention the concept of human desertification –, by the disappearance of thousands of small farms and by the crisis endured by many other bigger ones. Should the primary sector become once again the driver of urban renaissance? If this is so, how do we face the globalization imposed – unavoidably, as it seems – by the European policies? In short, we face a particularly complex situation where political willingness has a lot to say, although there does not seem to be enough of it to substantially change the current scenario.

There is still another variable we may find useful to consider, which has to do with Galicia's traditional territorial distribution. I am referring to the parish, the basic para-administrative unit around which life was structured in rural areas. What we should take into account is the consequences of acknowledging the parochial status and delegate certain authority to it. This would involve providing parishes with the power to make their own bottom-up decisions, and thus a way to attain social mobilization. The major problem is that many of these parishes – since they have become gradually deserted or have undergone a serious population ageing – have reached a point of no return. And yet we should try, even if it is only experimentally, to really make the most of this group of socio-spatial units we never allowed to play a leading role throughout most of the 20th century.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have highlighted a fact which is well known to all Galicians, i.e. the duality between coastal and inland areas. It is not simply an issue of a different economic or demographic dynamics, but also of a divergent territorial distribution – all of which are undoubtedly interrelated. I have placed special emphasis on the way villages position themselves in view of the various dynamics they will have to face in the next few years. I have grouped them into three categories: those comprised within the *Eixo Atlántico* and its Cantabrian extension; and those following the typical central place paradigm, which includes a sub-group of those creating its own dynamics and another sub-group of those surviving by phagocytizing their surroundings.

One of the key issues is how to determine whether the old central place paradigm can survive within the new territorial distribution models, and if so, what role would the villages play within this context. So far, the present circumstances do not seem to be very much in their favour, at least for those villages which used a growth strategy based on destroying their source of nurture. Today's continuous absorbing trend – now focused on the smaller municipal capitals – will probably not last long, either.

The DOT only comes to add more confusion, since all it does is mix up two totally opposed discourses. On the one hand, it refers to a hierarchical system with the seven biggest cities at the top, then the intermediate villages, and finally the territorial balancing nodes, which close this line of supramunicipally-influenced hierarchical settlements. But on the other hand, it also refers to polycentrism and to a new relationship between the country and the city, where villages – and more specifically nodes – play an outstanding role.

In short, the DOT contributes to the creation of an extremely blurred top-down discourse which places hierarchy and polycentrism at the same level, which treats the whole Galician region uniformly – despite the clear differences mentioned above – and which favours nothing more but the concentration of services and population. Last but not least, it is a set of guidelines where rural areas disappear completely from the

sphere of productivity. In fact, when describing the role of the territorial balancing nodes it suggests that in order to strengthen such level we must 'preservar a paisaxe e o medio natural da súa contorna'[19] (p. 23), without saying a word about the dynamization of other residential or economic activities.

I believe that the invisibilization of the country against the city is also taking place at a social level, at which villages are also being seen as basically lacking any interest. The urban world is becoming more and more a focus of innovation, modernity and cosmopolitanism[20], something than can be greatly perceived throughout the *Eixo Atlántico* where, no matter their size, there is a strong interaction between the different population settlements. In opposition to this, the inland rural areas show quite a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, they are the redoubt of an endangered lifestyle, and only attractive to some anthropological experiences seeking contact with a culture of the past and with an allegedly unaltered nature – even if sometimes they are turned into very advanced technological spaces, as it can be seen in some modernized farms. On the other hand, they have become the centre of attention to some social groups which value the quality of life of rural areas and may even end up moving there. Be it as it may, rural areas seem far from regaining their vitality – and even if they did, they would probably choose to directly address bigger cities, instead of going through the intermediate step villages represent.

Under this scenario, the latter are gradually losing their outstanding position. It is important to highlight that this applies mainly to those villages away from the *Eixo Atlántico*, and that those which were able to create a dynamics of their own show a clearly different picture. Actually, if we look at the characteristics of many Galician villages in detail, we will observe that they share most of the disadvantages of the biggest cities and just a few of their advantages. This is leading to their becoming less useful every day and, consequently, less attractive to new dwellers. Let's look at this in more detail.

From a morphological standpoint most villages – as we saw above – pursued a vertical growth which substantially contributed to their decharacterization. This led to the

destruction of much of their historical heritage and often the building of not very compact urban spaces where different building heights and land uses coexist – it is not hard to see what used to be a semi-detached house turned into an isolated building surrounded by unproductive orchards. The aesthetic aspects are no more than a link in a chain comprising also very poor building qualities, inadequately adapted infrastructures, and increasing traffic problems.

And we can still add a poorly diversified, highly tertiarized labour market, strongly relying on the public administrations. Public workers usually have to sit a competitive examination, and their stay in a village is frequently only an intermediate stage before they can move on to a more coveted destination. This is the case of educational and health services, to quote a few. During the past few years a new offer of shopping centres has reached some of these villages, sometimes making them more attractive to potential dwellers. But still, the competition from bigger shopping areas in the cities adds a serious obstacle to their survival and favours further commuting.

From the social point of view, villages also pose some difficulties to face the future. The absorption of their periphery somehow brought them back to the realm of primary social relations, which is exactly the opposite to what we could expect from an urban space. Many villages thus turned into new hamlets, where strong local ties play a leading role and may even turn into a real nightmare – particularly since what was expected was quite the opposite. And so they start to be identified with what cosmopolitanism should not be: 'parochial attitudes and immobility' (Jeffrey, McFarlane, 2008: 420) or 'cosmopolitanism is the opposite of parochialism, narrow-mindedness' (Nijman, 2007: 183).

It may be interesting to have a look at the local soap-operas, which have become quite successful in the past few years. The present or historical scenarios they recreate put quite a lot of emphasis on the villages, but they tend to reflect an excessively 'Galician' picture, i.e. too stereotyped and only strengthening the idea that living in a village is basically the same as living in a small hamlet – a repudiated place bringing up the memory of the

poverty and misfortune that pushed so many people to migration. In short, another perspective which points at the gradual functional loss experienced by many villages which can no longer even demographically compete with those municipalities which were just tiny hamlets not so long ago, but have now become part of that huger urban continuum.

Notes

[1] The term *small town* appears in italics because part of the political-academic discourse supports the idea that the term *village* should be replaced by *small town*. This topic will be indirectly addressed throughout this paper.

[2] Polycentrism should go along with a different way of understanding politics, whereby governance becomes increasingly relevant.

[3] They roughly match up the provinces of Lugo and Ourense, although in the first case the northern strip – referred to as the *Comarca da Mariña* – should rather be seen as a small Cantabrian Axis somehow resembling the Atlantic one.

[4] Quote translates as: 'which centralize the wider or narrower strip of land a specific rural district stretches throughout, offering a sufficient range of goods and services so as to cater for most of the needs of those inhabiting such service area'.

[5] Population censuses show that there are around 30,000 inhabited settlements (approximately 50 % of the Spanish total) and over 3,700 parishes in Galicia.

[6] To take some examples, more than 255,000 Galician citizens emigrated to different European destinations between 1961 and 1975, to which we must add the over 200,000 who dispersed themselves throughout the Spanish territory (Hernández, 1990). Just between 1971 and 1975 the annual average was over 22,000 people moving to Europe and around another 15,000 to urban areas in the Basque country and Catalonia mainly (Hernández & Durán, 1992).

[7] Such harsh conditions are partly due to the lack of public investment made in rural areas. In a world where urbanization was seen as a symbol of progress, all financial efforts were focused on urban areas.

[8] It was commonly understood that production-oriented agriculture should be the essence of modern rurality (Halfcree, 2007).

[9] I refer to them as 'so called natural' because they are actually cultural landscapes.

[10] A study carried out in 2003 by the Consorcio da Zona Franca de Vigo showed that many of the business parks further inland had very low occupation levels.

[11] The author shows how in the case of clients staying in rural tourism hotels located in inland villages of the province of A Coruña, about 94 % paid a visit

to close-by towns and cities, 70 % visited coastal sites, and only 2.5 % remained in the local surroundings.

[12] The DOT (*Guidelines for the Territorial Planning of Galicia*) underwent a long drafting process, after which it was subject to public approval around the middle of 2008. It is expected to become the official instrument to define the Galician territorial model.

[13] But even the DOT describes quite an opposite scenario, since it adopts a top-down approach where metropolitan areas play the leading role.

[14] To put an example, just in 2009 about 1,000 dairy farms ceased their activity in Galicia, which involved a sharp drop from 18,000 farms in 2003 to 12,000 in 2009.

[15] Rivera (2007) points out that migration is a cultural phenomenon and, quoting Bordieu, he insists that it is not simply a question of changing one's place of residence, but also a socio-biographical investment.

[16] Monoglot Galician speakers are ever more linked to the Galician nationalist political discourse, and are frequently non-native speakers.

[17] Such complex can be perceived not only through those features linked with urban morphology, but also at different discourse levels: from their obsessive concern to become 'the capital' of somewhere to their choice of a somewhat academic vocabulary tending to replace the concept of 'village' by that of 'town'.

[18] And we use the term 'exploitation' in its full meaning.

[19] Quote translates as: 'preserve the landscape and its surrounding natural environment'.

[20] One could talk about an emancipatory cosmopolitanism, but still it doesn't mean that there is a more progressivist attitude, but rather another way of facing the world (Jeffrey, McFarlane, 2008).

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